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December 15, 2017

Of sleigh bells and caribou

Seasonal images of reindeer this year have tended to take my mind not to thoughts of sleigh bells but to what has become an increasingly challenging and meaningful part of my work as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change – the survival of Canada's iconic boreal forest caribou.

The protection and preservation of our nation's extraordinary biodiversity is a cause that strikes a deep personal chord for me, as it does for many Canadians – because at the heart of the issue is a simple truth: human beings do not have a right, through our activities, to eliminate other species. Plus, in the long run, the human race will only be healthy if our natural environment is healthy.

In September, the World Wildlife Fund released a report card on the state of biodiversity in Canada. It was a very sobering document which showed significant declines over the past 30 years in many species of mammals, birds and fish. One of the mammals in steepest decline is the boreal caribou.

Recovery strategy

In 2012 federal, provincial and territorial governments jointly developed a caribou Recovery Strategy. It required that provinces and territories – which have primary responsibility for addressing species at risk issues on most (non-federal) lands – develop “range plans” by October 2017. These plans were to contain specific actions to protect the caribou's habitat and enable their numbers to stabilize and grow.

This implies a focus on things like selective harvesting and intensive reforestation, as elements of broad solutions – particularly in areas where habitat disturbance levels are already high.

Over this past year, Environment Minister Catherine McKenna and I have been working actively with the provinces and territories - encouraging each to bring forward robust and thoughtful plans. However, at the October deadline, no completed range plans were provided. It was clear that, while some progress has been made, more work and significant additional progress is required.

Though we clearly have a long way to go, I remain optimistic. In many

parts of the country I see Indigenous Peoples and key stakeholders – including industry, environmental organizations and local communities - stepping forward in good faith to bring creative, constructive ideas to the table.

Economy and environment

The scientific evidence irrefutably points to habitat loss resulting from economic activity as the primary cause for the boreal caribou's continuing decline. Yet logging, mining, and oil and gas extraction are as integral to our economy as conserving biodiversity is to our values.

Our government is deeply committed to achieving both protection of our natural environment and sustainable development of our natural resources. The boreal caribou issue is fast emerging as a proving ground for how both of these things can and must be achieved simultaneously.

The next twelve months will be critical. As we work very actively with provinces, territories, First Nations and key stakeholders to develop plans at the range level, the federal government will concurrently be assessing the state of critical habitat in all caribou ranges.

If appropriate protections are not in place, the law - the Species at Risk Act – directs the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to recommend to Cabinet that the federal government takes action that ensures such protection is provided. Clearly, however, direct intervention is not our preferred option.

Our government's intention is to work collaboratively – but quickly – with provinces, territories and stakeholders to develop robust conservation agreements that will enable the protection and recovery of boreal caribou while at the same time facilitating continued and sustainable economic development in the boreal forest.

While challenging, the caribou file offers opportunities for collaboration, creativity and compromise that can provide a template for broader efforts to protect species at risk in this country.

Getting this right is critically important. The plight of the boreal caribou is one in which we must ensure that the needs of the environment and the needs of the economy go hand in hand.

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